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AUTHOR Durkin, Dolores

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ABSTRACT

Academic testing observed in a year-long study of kindergarten classes in 15 districts was primarily concerned with whether children were succeeding with the content of a basal reader readiness workbook that essentially dealt with phonics. Such success was viewed as a prerequisite for the first preprimer in the basal series, the use of which generally marked the beginning of the first-grade reading program. Developmental testing (exemplified in Gesell's "School Readiness Test") was also undertaken before the start of kindergarten, reinforcing the belief that not all the five-year-olds were ready for kindergarten. If the child received low scores, a special "motor class" was usually recommended instead of a regular kindergarten. Academic tests were used primarily as information in reporting the children's progress. Clear evidence that the abilities of certain children were beyond current instruction resulted more often in negative reactions than in suitable challenge. Instead of programs being adapted to children, the children had to adapt to the program. The fact that observed programs were not more eclectic in their approach to reading was disappointing, given the likelihood that children who did not "make it" with whole class instruction in phonics might have enjoyed success if other possibilities were available. The observations suggest that existing practices in kindergarten merit reform if large numbers of five-year-olds are to be kept from failing with reading before they have even had a chance to get started. (Eleven references are included.) (NKA)

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TESTING IN THE KINDERGARTEN

Dolores Durkin

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign
51 Gerty Drive
Champaign, Illinois 61820

Bolt Beranek and Newman Inc.
10 Moulton Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02238

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Abstract

This report has to do with a year-long classroom observation study of kindergarten classes, which also included teacher and principal interviews. Only data having to do with testing practices are described.

Testing was of two kinds: developmental and academic. Tests in the first category, exemplified by Gesell's *School Readiness Test*, were administered prior to, or early in, the kindergarten year. Low scores were taken sufficiently seriously as to lead to recommendations to delay a child's entrance into kindergarten or, if one was available, to assign a child to a "special" developmental kindergarten, sometimes referred to as the "motor class." Reasons cited for this testing typically reflected the belief that some five-year-olds are not ready for kindergarten.

The academic tests were primarily concerned with learning whether members of a class were succeeding with the content of a basal reader readiness workbook, which, for the most part, dealt with phonics. Such success was viewed as a prerequisite for the first preprimer in the basal series, the use of which generally marked the beginning of the first-grade reading program.

Looked at together, the two types of tests showed contrasting concerns. On the one hand, the developmental tests were used to identify individual differences; on the other, the academic tests functioned in seeing whether a highly prescribed program in phonics offered to an entire class was being mastered.

Why the use of developmental tests and commercialized instruction offered to entire classes are both highly questionable is discussed.

TESTING IN THE KINDERGARTEN

Over the past decade or so, testing has become an increasingly prominent part of reading programs. Initially, interest in accountability, behavioral objectives, and criterion-referenced tests spawned the development; more recently, pressure for higher test scores from politicians and the public has been nourishing it. With the nourishment, the earlier worry that assessment would drive instruction has been replaced by confirmation that the tail *is* wagging the dog in a large number of classrooms (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985; Popham, 1985; Shannon, 1986).

The possibility that testing also figured prominently at the kindergarten level was not one I entertained until I undertook a recent year-long study of kindergarten programs that transformed the possibility into certainty. Although the study was extremely fruitful in the data it yielded, only findings about testing practices will be highlighted here. The origin of all the data is a combination of observations of 42 classes, each visited on two days, and of 54 interviews with teachers and administrators in 15 school systems.

Since a discussion of testing apart from its purposes is not very meaningful, two of the most important functions of tests will be reviewed before findings about assessment practices in the observed kindergartens are reported.

Reasons to Test

To begin, tests can provide information about what children do and do not know in relation to the contents of an instructional program. Depending on results, this testing may lead to an altered program. Later, tests serve the important function of informing teachers about the outcomes of instruction. Now, results should affect decisions about what to teach next or, perhaps, what to review or even re-teach.

Observed Programs

The close tie between instruction and the types of assessment just referred to calls for a description of those parts of the observed kindergarten programs that teachers thought were related to reading and that provided subject matter for some of the testing. Because most programs were very similar from one classroom to the next, the descriptions can be both brief and accurate.

Attention at the beginning went to colors, shapes, and numbers. With one exception, what was called "reading readiness instruction" originated in workbooks that, in most instances, were the beginning materials in the basal series used by the school. This meant that other instruction focused on letter names, auditory discrimination and, eventually, letter-sound correspondences. Although reading readiness workbooks were used more frequently than any other kind, mathematics, language, and printing were often covered with workbooks, too. A generous use of ditto sheets was also characteristic, especially for phonics and math.

The amount of preplanned instruction with whole words was noticeably affected by the first preprimer in the schools' basal series, the use of which marked the beginning of the first-grade reading program. In one school system, for example, kindergartners were expected to learn 19 specified words, along with 15 consonant sounds, because they are prerequisites for the first preprimer in one basal series.

Testing in the Kindergartens

The tests used were of two kinds. The first will be referred to as "developmental," the second as "academic."

Developmental tests. Nine of the 15 school districts administered developmental tests either in the spring prior to the start of kindergarten or soon after the school year began. (Two additional districts planned to give developmental tests for the first time the following year.) The most frequently used tests were the Gesell *School Readiness Test* (1978) and one entitled *Early Prevention of School Failure* (Heiniger, 1979), which was referred to as "the Peotone test" because it was developed in Peotone, Illinois. (Promotional materials say it is used in "over 50,000 schools throughout the United States.")

All the tests classified as "developmental" were heavily weighted with motor and visual-motor items. How seriously the results were taken is reflected in reasons cited for giving the tests:

> "to identify developmental lags"
> "to see who is developmentally ready"
> "to identify those who should stay home for a year"
> "to have children placed in the motor class"
> "to determine who goes to the developmental kindergarten"
> "to spot maturity levels and determine readiness for school"

The term "motor class," used in one of the explanations listed above, refers to "developmental kindergartens" in which enrollment is reduced, presumably to allow for additional help for children judged to be developmentally unready for regular kindergarten programs. Such children automatically spend one year in each of the two programs. Of the 15 school districts, four had developmental kindergartens. (Two requests to observe in them were denied.) Four districts had transitional first grades, which were for children who had attended kindergarten but were considered unready for first grade. Again, it was taken for granted that children would spend one year in the transitional first grade and the next in a regular first grade. In yet another district, children who "failed" kindergarten spent the following year attending kindergarten in the morning and a first grade in the afternoon.

Frankly, the use of developmental tests to make recommendations to postpone kindergarten attendance or to have a child spend two years in school before starting a "regular" first grade was unexpected, given the fact that both older and recent research raises serious questions about such practices. For example, in a review of studies presented at the annual AERA meeting in 1986, the Gesell *School Readiness Test* was singled out as being an especially questionable instrument for making decisions of the kind just mentioned (Shepard, 1986). In concluding her review of the literature, Shepard states:

> Despite the promises, providing an extra year before first grade does not solve the problems it is intended to solve. Children . . . show virtually no academic advantage over equally at-risk children who did not have the extra year. Furthermore, there is often an emotional cost associated with staying back even when parents and teachers are very enlightened about presenting the decision to the child (pp. 11-12).

Equally important for the present study is a second conclusion reached by Shepard:

> Other alternatives exist to solve the unreadiness problem but they are not so popular as simple answers such as a new test or a new grade level. . . . If one looks at existing research, successful programs are those which responded to individual differences in readiness (p. 12).

Based on interview data, the most developmentally-oriented teachers in the present study would not be even slightly affected by impeccable research data that contradicted their beliefs. Listening to them assign special importance to maturation and "additional time" as solutions for learning problems was reminiscent of articles--including some of my own--that describe the 1930s, the decade in which first graders were declared to be unready for reading because they were insufficiently mature (Durkin, 1968).

Academic tests. At the start of the year, 14 of the 29 teachers in the study administered tests that dealt with the recognition of colors, shapes, numbers, and letters. Three of these tests also assessed counting ability, and five had the children print whatever they could--individual letters or their names.

Seventeen teachers administered similar tests prior to the end of a "marking period" or just before parent conferences. End-of-unit tests in basal reader workbooks were also given and were part of the data used both for conferences and preparing report cards. (Only one class was not evaluated with a report card.)

In two school districts, the end-of-the-year test for kindergarten was the *Iowa Test of Basic Skills* (Lindquist & Hieronymus, 1972). In two others, the *Metropolitan Readiness Test* (Nurss & McGauvran, 1976) was administered. A test from the *SRA Achievement Series* (Naslund, Thorpe, & Lefever, 1978) was the choice of another district, whereas two more chose the *Stanford Early School Achievement Test* (Madden, Gardner, & Collins, 1982).

Why the first three standardized tests just named were used can be summarized with descriptions like "to check progress" and "to provide information for the first-grade teachers." For whatever reason, use of the *Stanford Early School Achievement Test*, which was administered to five classes, was explained with greater variety. Even though one kindergarten teacher described this lengthy test as "a terrible waste (of time)," another in the same school system said results were used to decide "who goes to summer school." How a teacher in another school system defined the purpose of the test was unexpectedly candid: "to put the results in their (the children's) folders." In contrast, one principal said that results helped "in making decisions for retention or placement in the transitional program."

The number of teachers who also referred to retentions, either in the course of being observed or during an interview, was unexpected, especially when certain children were singled out for that fate as early as January.

Use of Test Results

Having outlined the testing practices for kindergarten in 15 school districts, let me move on to discuss still further the use made of results from the "academic" tests. The discussion will proceed in the framework of the two purposes of testing reviewed earlier: (1) to see what children know in relation to the contents of instructional programs in order to learn whether a planned program is appropriate; and (2) to examine the outcomes of instruction in order to make decisions about what should come next.

Determining appropriateness of planned program. Evidence of concern about the appropriateness of the observed kindergarten programs was minimal. Some teachers did refer to "pushy" parents and the excessive pressures put on young children; however, as a group, the teachers either accepted, or had learned to tolerate, the programs they provided.

That what many did provide seemed to be cast in stone became apparent early in the study in a number of ways, but never so clearly as in the year-long schedule one teacher had that pinpointed exactly when everything would be taught. Other evidence of a lack of effort to match program with children included the following:

> In the classrooms of 13 of the 14 teachers who assessed abilities having to do with colors, numbers, and letters at the start of the year, every child still received the same instruction for those topics.
>
> Whenever both the morning and afternoon classes of a teacher were observed, the two were basically the same. In one school, efforts to do a better job in kindergarten by reducing class size and providing the teacher with an aide resulted in the teacher's having three classes per day. What was done in the first session was repeated with both the second and third classes.

To summarize, then, practically no evidence was found that any test was given for the purpose of learning whether pre-established programs were suitable. Instead of programs being adapted to children, it was the children who had to adapt to programs.

Determining outcomes of instruction. As mentioned earlier, teacher-made tests, along with the end-of-unit tests in basal workbooks, were often administered at the end of marking periods or prior to parent conferences. The timing suggests what the teachers confirmed: results were viewed primarily as information to be used in reporting the children's progress. Sometimes, test results also prompted teachers to give extra help at unscheduled times to individuals whose progress was slow.

In contrast, clear evidence that the abilities of certain children were beyond current instruction resulted more often in negative reactions than in suitable challenge. Observers' reports of some of these children are cited below:

> One boy was scolded several times for "trying to act like the teacher." He always had answers and did not want to wait to give them.
>
> One child had a lot to say about a lot of topics and was obviously eager to share his knowledge. In talking about him later, the teacher said he was "developmentally young" and had remained home an extra year. She added that "his immaturity really showed" and was bothersome.
>
> An obviously bright boy was scolded for saying of an activity, "This is boring." Later, when other children commented that the assigned workbook pages were "too easy," the teacher did not scold them, but shrugged off the reaction by commenting, "No, you're too smart."

Probably the best and quickest way to summarize findings about the use of tests to make instructional decisions is with a reference to comments made by a teacher during an interview. Asked what she thought was especially difficult about teaching kindergarten, the teacher replied, "There is great variation in what comes to you." She then added, "But by the end of the year, they're more leveled out."

Some Concluding Comments

Just as "regression to the mean" should not be the goal of schooling, neither should uniform programs marked by one methodology be the aim of those responsible for developing literacy in five-year-olds. Why the observed programs were not more eclectic in their approach to reading was disappointing, given the likelihood that children who did not "make it" with whole class instruction in phonics might have enjoyed success if other possibilities were available.

Although it is tempting to point a finger at commercial materials and first-grade teachers' expectations as the reasons why so much time went to phonics, that would be only a partially correct conclusion. Based on interviews, the kindergarten teachers themselves are yet another reason for all the attention that went to phonics. To explain why data suggest this, let me conclude with a very brief report of some interview findings.

When the teachers were asked whether they thought reading ought to be taught in kindergarten, answers for the most part were negative, which was unexpected since all were teaching phonics. The most developmentally-oriented teachers explained their opposition to teaching reading with such responses as:

> "Reading is a skill that can be taught, but when the child is ready it takes two weeks. At age five, you spend eight months; at age seven, it takes two weeks."
>
> "Five-and-a-half-year-olds have the ability to move from left to right, but not to return. They are visually not ready. If they are not forced, it will happen naturally and more easily."
>
> "I believe that if they're ready, they'll read in spite of me."

Why teachers could object to reading instruction and, at the same time, teach phonics can be explained with the comment of one teacher:

> "Phonics is not reading instruction because we only teach letters and sounds."

The separation made between reading instruction and phonics may account for a common omission in the phonics instruction seen, namely, the failure to make explicit to the children the connection between learning about sounds and the ability to read words.

To be both realistic and fair, what also needs to be recognized is the difficulty--maybe even the impossibility--of kindergarten teachers' rejecting phonics instruction when "district demands," report cards, commercial materials, and first-grade teachers' expectations all combine to support it. Clearly, existing practices in kindergarten merit--even demand--reform if large numbers of five-year-olds are to be kept from failing with reading even before they have had a chance to get started.

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